

The Job

or by the sweat of thy brow shalt thou fail to earn thy bread

By Bertolt Brecht

In the decades after the Great War unemployment and the oppression of the lower orders went from bad to worse. An incident which took place in Mainz shows better than any peace treaty, history book or statistical table the barbaric condition to which the great European countries had been reduced by their inability to keep their economies going except by force and exploitation. One day in 1927, a poverty-stricken family in Breslau called Hausmann, consisting of husband, wife and two small children, received a letter from a former workmate of Hausmann's offering him his job, a position of trust which he was giving up because of a small legacy in Brooklyn. The letter caused feverish excitement in the family which three years of unemployment had brought to the verge of desperation. The man (who was down with pneumonia) rose at once from his sick-bed, asked his wife to put a few essentials in his old case and several cardboard boxes, took his children by the hand, told his wife how she was to close down their miserable home, and in spite of his weakened condition, went to the station. (He hoped that, whatever happened, taking the children with him would confront his friend with a fait accompli.) Slumped in his compartment with a high fever, he was glad to let a young fellow traveller, a housemaid who had been sacked and was on her way to Berlin, take care of his children, supposing him to be a widower. She even bought them a few little things that she paid for out of her own money. In Berlin his condition was so bad that he had to be taken almost unconscious to the hospital. There he died five hours later. The housemaid, a certain Fraülein Leidner, had foreseen this eventuality, so she had not left the children but taken them with her to cheap lodgings. She had paid all sorts of expenses for the dead man and his children, and she was sorry for the helpless little mites, so, without due consideration perhaps, for it would doubtless have been better to send word to Frau Hausmann, asking her to come, she went back to Breslau the same evening with the children. Frau Hausmann took the news with the terrible blank placidity that you sometimes find in people who have long forgotten what a peaceful, normal existence is like. For the whole of the next day the two women were busy buying cheap mourning clothes on hire-purchase. Meanwhile they set about clearing out the house, though this now of course made no sense at all. Standing in the empty rooms, laden with cases and cardboard boxes, the woman was struck just before their departure by a terrible thought. The job which was lost when she lost her husband had not been out of her mind for a minute. The only thing that mattered was to salvage it at all costs: Fate could not be expected to make such an offer a second time. At the last moment she adopted a plan that was as bold as her situation was desperate: she aimed to stand in for her husband and take the job as nightwatchman - for that is what it was - disguised as a man. No sooner had she settled this in her own mind than she tore the black rags from her body, undid the cord of the suitcase, pulled out her husband's Sunday suit and clumsily put it on before her children's eyes, with the help of her new-found friend who had almost instantaneously understood what she was up to. Thus it was a new family that travelled to Mainz to renew the assault on the promised job, and one that consisted of no more mouths than before. Even so do fresh recruits fill the gaps caused by gunfire in the ranks of decimated battalions.

The date by which the current holder of the job had to join his ship in Hamburg did not permit the women to leave the train at Berlin for Hausmann's funeral. While he was being moved, unaccompanied, from the hospital to be lowered into his grave, his wife was being shown round the factory in his very clothes with his papers in her pocket by his former workmate with whom she had quickly come to an arrangement. She had spent an day in the workmate's flat - all this incidentally in front of the children – practising her husband's walk, his way of sitting and eating, and his manner of speech under the eyes of his workmate and her new friend. Little time elapsed between the moment when Hausmann was committed to the grave and the moment when she took the promised job.

Brought back to life - that is to say, to the process of production - by a combination of fortune and fate, the two women led their new life in the most orderly and circumspect fashion as Herr and Frau Hausmann with their children. The job of nightwatchman in a big factory is not undemanding. The nightly round of the yards, workshops and stores calls for reliability and courage, qualities that have from time immemorial been called *manly*. The fact that Hausmann's widow was equal to these demands - she even received a public commendation from the management for having caught and secured a thief (a poor devil who was trying to steal some wood) proves that courage, physical strength and presence of mind can be shown by anybody, man or woman, who really needs a job. In a few days the woman became a man, in the same way as men have become men over the millennia: through the production process.

For four years, the little family with its growing children lived in relative security while all around them unemployment increased. Thus far the Hausmanns' domestic situation had aroused no suspicion in the neighbourhood. But then came an incident which had to be smoothed over. The caretaker of the block often sat in the Hausmanns' flat of an evening. The three of them played cards. The “nightwatchman” sat there with legs apart, in shirtsleeves, a tankard of beer in front of her (a picture later to be given prominence in the illustrated magazines). Then the nightwatchman went on duty, leaving the caretaker sitting with the young wife. Intimacy was unavoidable. Now whether Fraülein Leidner let the cat out of the bag, or whether the caretaker saw the nightwatchman changing through a half-open door, suffice it to say that a point came when the Hausmanns began to have trouble with him. He was a drinking man whose job provided him with a free flat but not much else, and from then on they had to make payments to him. Things got particularly difficult when the neighbours began to notice Haase's - that was his name - visits to the Hausmann flat, and Frau Hausmann's habit of taking leftovers and bottles of beer to the caretaker's office became a subject of gossip in the neighbourhood. Rumours about nightwatchman's indifference to the indecent goings-on in his flat even reached the factory and for a time shook the management's confidence in him. The three were forced to stage a break in their friendship for public consumption. Of course, however, the caretaker's exploitation of the two women did not stop, but got even worse. An accident at the factory put an end to the whole thing and brought the catastrophic affair to a conclusion.

When one of the boilers blew up one night, the nightwatchman was injured, not seriously, but badly enough to be carried away unconscious. When Frau Hausmann woke up, she found herself in a hospital for women. She was unspeakably outraged. With wounds in her legs and back, swathed in bandages, racked by nausea, but gripped by a fear even greater than could be caused by wounds whose full extent she did not know, she dragged herself through a ward full of sleeping women patients to the head nurse. Before the nurse could say a word - she was still dressing and, grotesque as it may seem, the spurious nightwatchman had to overcome her acquired embarrassment at seeing a partially dressed woman, something only permitted to members of the same sex - Frau Hausmann overwhelmed her with pleas not to report the disastrous state of affairs to the management. It was

not without pity that the sister told the desperate woman, who twice fainted but insisted on going on with the interview, that the papers had already gone to the factory. What she did not tell her was that the incredible story had also gone through the town like a brushfire.

The hospital released Frau Hausmann in men's clothes. She came home in the morning, and from noon on the whole quarter gathered in the hall and on the pavement outside to wait for the male impersonator. That evening the police took the unfortunate woman into custody to put an end to the uproar. She was still in men's clothes when she got into the car. She no longer had anything else.

She continued to fight for her job while in custody, needless to say without success. It was given to one of the countless thousands waiting for any vacancy, one whose legs chanced to have between them the organ recorded on his birth certificate. Frau Hausmann, who cannot be accused of leaving any stone unturned, is thought to have worked as a waitress in a suburban bar, amid photographs (some of which she had posed for after being found out) showing her in shirtsleeves playing cards and drinking beer as a nightwatchman and to have been regarded as resident freak by the skittle players. Thereafter she probably sank without trace into the ranks of that army of millions who are forced to earn their modest bread by selling themselves, wholly, in part, or to one another, shedding in a few days century-old habits which had almost seemed eternal and, as we have seen, even changing sex, without success - who are in short lost and, if we are to believe the prevailing view, lost forever.